

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 390

CS 206 925

AUTHOR Sewell, Ernestine P.
TITLE "Ars Dictaminis" and Modern Rhetorical Practice.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (13th, Houston, TX, April 15-17, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; College English; Higher Education; *Letters (Correspondence); *Rhetoric; Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

Although not all the problems of writing are solved by practice in letter writing, a review of the classical texts on "ars dictaminis"--letter writing--creates a strong argument for its increased use as an exercise in college composition classrooms. By incorporating the lessons of dictamen as a device for achieving rhetorical modes--narration, description, exposition, argumentation, or whatever set of rhetorical goals are used--students will progress with less difficulty from loose oral thinking to logically ordered written thought. Further, many students who face writer's block can achieve confidence when directed away from teacher as audience to someone of their choice. Also, they will realize the effectiveness of different levels of usage as they change audience, topic, and purpose for writing. Moreover, by the simple mechanical device of having to determine audience, the writer unconsciously achieves tone. The mechanical necessity of putting name to letter also apprises the student of the importance of being clear and correct. Grammar, style, and rhetoric are integrated, as is the rhythm of the language. Finally, the practicality of writing letters appeals to the students, for whatever their chosen professions, they know that they will always write letters. In short, the classical mandates of completeness, clarity, conciseness, and logic take on personal significance when students are asked to write letters. (RL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

+ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

"Ars Dictaminis and Modern Rhetorical Practice"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ernestine P. Sewell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Ernestine P. Sewell, Professor
University of Texas at Arlington
Arlington, Texas 76019

Ars Dictaminis and Modern Rhetorical Practice

Instructors in composition have long used letter writing for achieving specific goals. To motivate a student to use skills of argumentation, a standard assignment is to take a current political or social issue and write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper or respond to an editorial. To thaw the frozen resources of students having "nothing to write," teachers direct them to write letters, relying perhaps on the free writing techniques of Ken Macrorie in Telling Writing to narrate an experience or describe acquaintances. Students are often given models, as in Robert Scholes and Nancy Conley's The Practice of Writing (1981) and Ross Winterowd's The Contemporary Writer (1975), and directed to collections of letters to examine and emulate expressive discourse. Occasionally, one may find within a text, as Elizabeth and Greg Cowan's Writing (1980), the letter of application, with technical instruction for orderly presentation of the required information and recognition of the practicality of being able to compose a successful letter of the kind. Texts that deal with the letter of application usually extend the writing of the letter to the preparation of a résumé, and this may well be for some students the most attractive part of the text. Teachers of composition, though, will probably view it as service to the student to which they will voice no objection but which they will evaluate as contributing little to the time-honored goals of a composition class and better left to the technical writing teacher. Likewise, D. H. Lawrence's letter to Cynthia Asquith, January 30, 1915, and other such models, are viewed as literary rather than rhetorical.

Whence this division, fallaciously paradoxical? The value of letters to the student of literature is recognized, but the value to the rhetorician has not been investigated--even in face of the admission by many college teachers of composition that they themselves achieved and sharpened their own skills by writing letters from the time they were mere children.

Because of the questions the paradox raises, an investigation into ars dictaminis, the art of letter writing, is proposed. A distinctly medieval development in rhetoric, lost to the western world historical surveys because of a curious trend that seems to have originated with the Venerable Bede to equate rhetoric with style rather than with logic, ars dictaminis is in fact recoverable. It is anticipated that this study will lead to insights of practical value to today's instructor--as well as suggest a harmonious whole of composition as rhetoric and art.

Ars Dictaminis broke decisively with the oral tradition. Affairs of state, court, and business had proliferated and created a need for writing letters. There is fourth century evidence that a man of affairs should know all about letters, for C. Julius Victor had appended to his Ars Rhetorica model letters, termed formulae, which were still available and in use during the Merovingian and Carolingian eras; however, it was not until complicated international patterns emerged that a systemized and theoretical formulary for letter writing was devised.¹

Alberic of Monte Cassino, a Benedictine, is accepted as the pivotal figure in the development of the art. In 1087 he combined ancient discourse with the new art of correspondence in Flores rhetorici, or Dictaminis radii. This work is concerned with the ornaments of composition, figures of speech, and felicitous phrasing. A later work, Breviarium de dictamine, prescribed rules for prose

composition. The further history of such formularies is extensive: suffice it to say that they included grammar, the rhythmical patterns of prose, called cursus, the figures or flowers of speech, and, altogether, a practical application of ancient rhetorical tradition. Briefly, the parts were the standard classical salutatio, or greeting; the captatio benevolentiae, or exordium; the narratio; the petitio, or specific request, demand, or announcement; and a short conclusio. Not all the parts of classical oratory were rigidly employed, however, because there had already been established anciently a distinction between the private and public letter, both of which the formularies treated.

There was an art of preaching with rules for oral discourse and an art of poetry, but ars dictaminis was the only source available for the writer of prose.

A translation of Alberic's dictamen is, like so many other classical texts, surprisingly modern. Perhaps the constant between the writers of Alberic's time and the writers of our time is that writing a letter is the act of a civilized man. There is an interesting essay on letter writing as a civilized act in Time, June 22, 1981.

At the prewriting stage, Alberic advised:

". . . search out what is clear, what is obscure, what is insignificant, what is important, what adds nobility, and what adds vileness. . . . let your composition move at a steady pace . . . ; avoid sudden transitions; do not drag in a thousand little rags to be sewn onto the fabric. . . . For it is a defilement of the composition if one wanders too far from the theme proposed at the beginning, if he smears a perfect piece of cloth by dipping it into pots of dye. After all, what can you call it but a stain

to defile and violate the structure expected in the manner of one who deforms a body by attaching all manner of superfluous members to it?²

To begin, "We must consider the identity of the sender and of the person to whom the letter is sent for the relationship established between sender and receiver is of utmost importance³; we must consider whether he is noble or common in rank, a friend or an enemy, and then what kind of person he is and of what background."³ Guido Faba, who wrote his Summa Dictaminis about 1225, devoted about one-third of his work to the establishment of a salutatio that would render the reader well disposed to the sender.⁴ We may infer that these influential scholars of dictamen believed that no communication would take place until the audience is determined and the relationship between the two well-established.

The next step, according to Alberic, demands of the writer that he ask himself "what attitude he wishes to project; proud or humble, harsh or forgiving, threatening, flattering, stern, or that of a trusted friend. If you write to an exalted person, use a style that is exalted; to a simple person use a style that is simple; to a friend use a friendly style; and to an enemy a style that is bold. If a learned man is writing one who is educated poorly or not at all, he should govern his words according to the powers of his correspondent. . . . Fashion your salutation from the person, the topic and the purpose you have in mind."⁵

After the salutation begins the exordium, a statement of the general principle of the letter: the thesis. Generally a brief paragraph is recommended, the writer exhorted to keep in mind the necessity for always rendering the reader well-disposed and keeping his attention.

After the exordium comes the narratio, again short and clear. Should the letter be argumentative, the argument is established by logic and the conclusion recalls to memory the principle point and locks it there. "And logic," Alberic warned, "should not stagger on like a widow bereaved of the support of examples; there I propose that . . . one's work be brilliant with examples, both original and drawn from other sources."⁶

About the choice of words, Alberic insisted the writer develop a facility for correctness and good usage: bad usage "leaves a disfiguring stain on one's eloquence." The writer must avoid improprieties of style such as barbarisms and solecisms, never use more words than necessary, and be wary of cacophony, "a harsh combination of words in which the similarity of the sound between the end of one and the beginning of the next causes syllables to clash." About ambiguity, he said: "And do not overlook the tricky problem of ambiguity, where one's words act as though they are drunk, unable to establish a firm basis of understanding." Then Alberic catalogued the "flowers of rhetoric" and explained the apt use of each.⁷

Added to later formularies was cursus theory, a continuation of interest in the metrics of Latin prose with increased attention to word accent instead of the quantitative system of Quintilian. Basically cursus requires that the last two words of a clause be in accentually euphonious combinations. Its three forms can be understood from these examples:

<u>cursus planus</u> : help' and / defend' us	(tempo: average)
<u>cursus tardus</u> : gov'erned and / sanctified	(tempo: slow)
<u>cursus velox</u> : punished for / our' off'enses ⁸	(tempo: fast)

Further elucidation is beyond the scope of this paper inasmuch as it applied to Latin.

But the emphasis on rhythmical prose merits serious consideration; moreover, with the research on suprasegmental phonemes in English, the instructor has resources for aiding students to understand and foreground rhythmical endings to enhance their own prose.

By 1405 in England Thomas Merke had produced an Ars Dictaminis which was actually a treatise on prose composition, inclusive of grammar, style, and models for imitation. In short, applied rhetoric was available to the aspiring writer through ars dictaminis altogether: the circuits of the intellectualizing of the writing process were programmed by letter writing for the latter-day medievalists.⁹

The place of the art in Renaissance England is demonstrated by William Fulwood's Enimie of Idlenesse (1568). Fulwood provided models for imitation with specific recommendations for exposition and persuasion. A merchant, he considered it profitable for the rising mercantile class to learn to write letters organized like a logical argument, having cause, intent, and consequence, with a major thesis, a minor thesis, and a conclusion.¹⁰

Another in the series was The English Secreterie (1586) by Angel Day, which went through three editions. It has models of descriptive, laudatory, interpretive, deliberative, hortatory, conciliatory, judicial, familiar, and even amatory letters. He developed the topics invention and arrangement and devoted a section to stylistics and the use of figures.¹¹

Both of these formularies are representative of a change in dictamen. Most scholars of English literature will trace epistolary writing in the western world to the Senecan tradition whereas the professionals of English composition should investigate the efficacies of the medieval traditions. Justus Lipsius whose

achievement bridged the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had written, among other works, Epistulae Morales, and translated Seneca. His works were made available to the English by John Hoskyns, whose work, in turn, was source material for Ben Jonson's Discoveries. New models for letters from Lipsius ran to essay writing, not Ciceronian oratorical organizations. He prescribed five qualities for the epistolary style: brevitas, perspicuitas (lucidity), simplicitas, venustas (liveliness of expression), and decentia (appropriateness). The greatest influence, however, of Lipsius was his discovery of self, essentially a Senecan derivative of Stoicism. As a result, the formularies gave way to the advancements of essays, which were no other than expressive discourse. Somewhat speedily, the rise of epistolary fiction marked the demise of any remnants of the epistolary formularies.¹²

Another development in England aided in this change in treatment of discourse. During the fifteenth century, legal matters had proliferated and barristers were in demand. The legal courts were the university, the training ground, and the Inns of the Court found the heart of their system and method in dictamen. It provided a clear, effective framework, a standard of reference, precise syntactical directives, and a series of catchwords and phrases at the beginning of each part, much like the signals of present English transitional schemes. Thus, the barristers at the Inns comfortably adopted it to their own needs.

In summary, the long tradition beginning with Bede of viewing rhetoric as art, a tradition reinforced by a rediscovery of the efficaciousness of Seneca, and the adoption by the legal community of the formularies in the Ciceronian mode dichotomized rhetorical theory into rhetoric for art and rhetoric for logic.

My position in this paper is that by incorporating the lessons of dictamen as a device for achieving rhetorical modes--narration, description, exposition, and argumentation (or whatever set of rhetorical goals)--students will progress with less difficulty from loose oral thinking to logically ordered written thought. Letter writing could easily be the common ground where logic and composition meet as it was established historically. Further, many students who face writer's block can achieve confidence when directed away from teacher as audience to someone of their choice. Also, they will realize the effectiveness of different levels of usage as they change audience and topic and purpose for writing. Moreover, by the simple mechanical device of having to determine that audience, the writer unconsciously achieves tone, that nebulous quality that follows in the wake of the student's attitude toward audience, topic, and purpose. Likewise, the mechanical necessity of putting his or her name to the letter apprises the student of the importance to be clear and correct. Grammar, style, and rhetoric are integrated, as is the rhythm of their language--the suprasegmental phonemic dimension. Students are not advised to read aloud and revise until the paper "sounds right": they can be taught specific knowledge about the accentual patterning of their sentences. Finally, the practicality of writing letters appeals to the students, for they know that whether or not their professions call for writing after graduation, most of them will write letters. In short, the classical mandates of completeness, clarity, conciseness, and logic take on personal significance for the student. There is no guarantee that these instructional goals are achieved automatically simply by writing letters; on the other hand, it is not unreasonable to anticipate development of the cognitive powers from free and more or less incoherent writing

to the production of structured purposeful writing: for example, to move from writing the personal, or private, letter to writing a letter of complaint because the motorcycle recently purchased fails to operate efficiently requires a mental leap comparable to that leap from childishness to adulthood.

Teachers of remedial and freshman English will confirm that letter writing is a common sense approach to composition; yet they proceed to give practice work in conventional rhetorical modes without the felicitous advantages of letter writing for purposes of rhetorical mode. Perhaps they see letter writing as a skill apart from composing and therefore feel that they would be dragging composition into the sawdust and filings of some workshop, but there need not be such disastrous results. Naturally, the instructor will have to exercise the same judgment of the students' products when they write letters as for other composition strategies, but there is no reason why rhetoric and art cannot be companionate.

For the instructor, however, the advantages may still be a little obscure. But what is a personal letter if not a narrative of events? And what is a letter home from someone in a foreign country if not description mainly? And what is the letter telling about the difficulties of chemistry if not exposition? And what is the letter persuading parents to allow the writer to transfer to another university if not argumentation? Robert Scholes and Nancy Conley, in The Practice of Writing, demonstrate how letter writing may be used for expressive writing in their three-pronged approach to writing as being writer-oriented, reader-oriented, or topic-oriented. These approaches allow a more psychologically centered interpretation of rhetoric with its focus on communication between encoder and decoder. The strategy may be extended: the private letter may be expressive but it may also

be reader-oriented, or topic-oriented, i.e., referential in nature. Fortunately there is a text that treats letter writing within the context of rhetorical modes: Jim W. Corder's Contemporary Writing (1979).¹³

This paper does not claim that all the problems of writing are solved by letter writing, but it does suggest reinterpretation of "internal speech, the nature of rhythm, the theory of expression, the mental images aroused by certain classes of words [the flowers of rhetoric, according to Alberici], the basis of motive, choice, and volition," a reinterpretation called for by Fred Newton Scott, in "Rhetoric Rediviva" edited by Donald Stewart in College Composition and Communication, December 1980.¹⁴ Though Scott looked to modern psychological theory for answers, the suggestion of this paper is that the "lost" formularies of dictamen provide chapters worthy of investigation also, not divorced from psychological and cognitive goals for reinterpretation of the history of rhetoric and art, rather than of rhetoric or art. And, finally, having been reestablished in the history of the rise of English prose, letter writing may be recognized as an especially convenient device for instruction in the art of rhetoric.

End Notes

¹James J. Murphy's Medieval Eloquence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography (University of Toronto Press, 1971); Rhetoric in the Middle Ages (University of California Press, 1974); and Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts (University of California Press, 1971) are major sources for the scholar of medieval rhetoric.

²Joseph M. Miller, Jr., "Flowers of Rhetoric," in Readings in Medieval Rhetoric, eds., Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 134-35.

³Miller, p. 138.

⁴Charles B. Faulhaber, "The Summa Dictaminis of Guido Faba," Medieval Eloquence, ed., James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 95.

⁵Miller, p. 138.

⁶Miller, p. 139.

⁷Miller, p. 142.

⁸George A. Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times (Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 186.

⁹Baldwin, Charles Sears, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (Gloucester, Massachusetts, Peter Smith, 1959), p. 215.

¹⁰Gary R. Grund, "From Formulary to Fiction: The Epistle and the English Anti-Ciceronian Movement," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 17 (Summer 1975), 385.

¹¹Grund.

¹²Grund, pp. 386-87. See also Morris Croll, Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 167- 76. For a discussion of John Hoskyns' adoption of Lipsian rules for "penning of letters," see George Williamson, The Senecan Amble (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 94-112.

¹³Corder, Jim W. Contemporary Writing (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979), pp. 346-65.

¹⁴Scott, Fred Newton, "Rhetoric Rediviva," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December 1980) 417.